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Feds move on PCB threat

Razing of Aerovox site would cost \$9 million

By BECKY W. EVANS, Standard-Times staff writer

NEW BEDFORD — Federal environment officials are proposing a \$9 million demolition of the vacant Aerovox building at 740 Belleville Ave., which is contaminated with the same toxic chemicals that the electrical parts manufacturer dumped into New Bedford harbor for more than 30 years.

Razing the 450,000-square-foot brick building will protect neighboring Acushnet and this city's residents from the threat of a toxic chemical fire and prevent further harbor pollution, said Stacy Greendlinger, spokeswoman for the Environmental Protection Agency's New England office.

Cancer-causing PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are found throughout the building's walls and floors as well as in the soil and groundwater near the site.

If the Aerovox mill on the banks of the Acushnet River ever caught fire, the burning materials would release PCBs into the air along with asbestos and other harmful fumes, such as dioxins and furans, Ms. Greendlinger told The Standard-Times yesterday.

"We don't want to see the community face that threat," she said.

An EPA study of the Aerovox site analyzed five short-term cleanup options. The recommended alternative calls for the demolished building to be buried at the site and covered with a protective cap of clean soil.

The cap would contain the PCBs underground, keeping them away from contact with humans and the harbor, Ms. Greendlinger said.

The EPA is working with the city to coordinate the demolition with redevelopment of the site for commercial and industrial use, she said. The city would act as the lead agency for the cleanup with the EPA providing technical and environmental oversight.

Involving a developer at the demolition phase will prevent the cap from being opened in the future for construction purposes, Ms. Greendlinger said. She added the EPA is undergoing a cultural change in how it views Superfund site cleanups.

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"We are trying to redevelop as many sites as we can," she said.

The Aerovox demolition could start as early as summer 2007 and would take about a year to complete, EPA project manager David Dickerson said.

The EPA will fund the \$9 million cleanup with some of the money coming from the Aerovox bankruptcy settlement, he said.

In 1999, the EPA ordered Aerovox to demolish the building and cap the polluted site, but the manufacturer filed for bankruptcy before beginning the work. The mill has been vacant since April 2001.

The EPA wants to include the public as it plans for the demolition of the Aerovox site, Ms. Greendlinger said.

On June 14, it will host a public meeting at 7 p.m. at the Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational-Technical High School. The meeting kicks off a monthlong public comment period on the five cleanup options presented in the EPA study.

Ben Bryant of the Coalition for Buzzards Bay said members of the nonprofit group are "very supportive of the Superfund cleanup project going forward and ... are eager to hear what the plans are for the Aerovox site."

The coalition is located down the street from the mill.

Acushnet Selectman David Wojnar encouraged residents who live near the mill to join him at the meeting.

"I am anxious to hear what the EPA has to say," he said. "With any contaminated site, you want to make sure the remediation process is done in a safe manner."

Mr. Dickerson said spraying the building with water during the demolition will help control air contaminants.

"There will be a lot of air monitoring" during the demolition to ensure the safety of nearby residents, he said.

Aerovox and Cornell Dubilier — both manufacturers of electrical capacitors and transformers — discharged PCBs into New Bedford Harbor from around 1940 to 1977. The polluted area covers 18,000 acres and includes all of the harbor and parts of the Acushnet River and Buzzards Bay.

Fish, lobsters, quahogs and other seafood from the harbor contain high levels of PCBs and can cause serious health problems if eaten regularly. A 1979 ban on fishing and lobstering in the harbor remains in effect.

Listed as a federal Superfund site in 1983, the area contains an estimated 880,000 cubic yards of contaminated sediment — enough to fill 175 football fields 3 feet deep. For the past two years, the EPA has dredged contaminated sediment from the harbor and shipped it to a PCB-landfill in Michigan.

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